

Recreationists

Biking, paragliding, picnicking, dog walking, surfing—the possibilities for recreation are endless at the GGNRA. Visitors come to these parklands every day to satisfy their craving for fun and to admire the beautiful scenery. This enjoyable behavior is not a new phenomenon. Pleasure seekers have sought entertainment and recreation from this land for more than one hundred years! Entrepreneurs Adolph Sutro and the Whitney Brothers helped establish and nurture the recreational spirit of the lands that now comprise the GGNRA. Sutro Baths, the Cliff House, and Whitney’s at the Beach were popular destinations that provided affordable recreation to all people.

Adolph Sutro purchased the Cliff House in 1881 and sought to create an atmosphere that was respectable, fun, and welcoming to all. The Cliff House offered visitors refreshments, a view of the ocean and Seal Rock, and access to an impressive seashell collection. He opened Sutro Baths, the world’s largest indoor swimming pool complex, in March of 1896. Visitors could choose between seven different swimming pools—one freshwater and six saltwater. Additionally, visitors could tour a museum displaying artifacts gathered by Sutro during his travels. After his passing in 1898, ownership of the Cliff House and Sutro Baths eventually passed to the Whitney Brothers.



A couple poses arm-in-arm in front of the third Cliff House in 1935—a popular tradition among visitors. Even during its two previous incarnations, visitors often chose the Cliff House as a backdrop for their photos.



This image of the Sutro Baths shows the interior pools in 1943. During high tides, water flowed directly into the pools from the ocean, recycling two million gallons of water in an hour.



Left: Adolph Sutro poses in his garden at Sutro Heights, circa 1885. Right: George K. Whitney, Sr., seated along the walkway at Ocean Beach across from Playland, circa 1940s-1950s.



In this 1920s image of Ocean Beach taken from Sutro Heights, Chutes at the Beach is seen on the left. The recreational opportunities of the area made it a popular destination, as can be seen by the amount of people and cars.

George and Leo Whitney arrived in San Francisco in the early 1920s and opened two photography studios. One of these studios was located at Ocean Beach next to Arthur Looff and John Friedle’s amusement district, Chutes at the Beach. With the onset of the Great Depression the brothers began buying parts of the amusement park. By 1937, they owned the Cliff House and almost all of Chutes at the Beach. They renamed the park Whitney’s at the Beach, though it was also known as Playland—a popular name for amusement parks at the time. The Whitney Brothers welcomed recreationists of all types to the Cliff House and Playland.

Even during the economic difficulties of the 1930s, people flocked to Playland and the Cliff House for their affordable entertainment. Playland proved to be an escape that captivated visitors with its low cost carnival-style rides and games. As George Whitney, Jr., recalled, “...sailors had nickels and dimes. They didn’t have dollars. And then we had lots of things [to do].” Visitors floated down the chutes, spun around on the merry-go-round, observed dangerous animals, and dined on warm meals at the newly-revived Cliff House. Although Playland and Sutro Baths no longer exist, the Sutro District managed by the GGNRA preserves the legacies of Adolph Sutro and the Whitney Brothers by continuing to bring recreation and entertainment to the masses.